

Boating on the Wallowa and Grande Ronde Rivers

The river corridor between Minam, Oregon, and Heller Bar, Washington includes the lower ten miles of the Wallowa River and the lower 81 miles of the Grande Ronde River. Public lands are managed in part by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, and the States of Oregon and Washington. The river canyons in Oregon have been designated *National Wild and Scenic Rivers* and *State Scenic Waterways*, in recognition of their unique natural character and outstanding resource values.

The “upper river” between Minam and Troy consists of steep basalt canyons and ascending ridges within dense evergreen forest, portions of which are only accessible by boat. The meandering curves of the “middle river” parallel a seldom-travelled County road through the rural community of Troy and nearby ranches, as the canyon begins to widen and forests gradually yield to open ridges and steep range lands. The “lower river” section in Washington is characterized by sparsely-vegetated, rugged terrain, and contains the history of ancient peoples and pioneer homesteads amongst a few active ranches. The entire river corridor is a complex ecosystem rich in unique natural features, history, spectacular scenery, and a variety of plant and animal life.

Each year the area receives thousands of visitors seeking the beauty and diverse recreation opportunities that the rivers offer. Where road and trail access is most limited, whitewater boaters travel the river using a variety of specialized watercraft. A typical float trip begins at Minam on the Wallowa River and lasts two to three days, taking out on the Grande Ronde River downstream. Shorter or longer trips are possible with proper planning. Other popular river access points include Wildcat Bridge, Mud Creek, Palmer Junction, Troy, State Line, Cougar Creek, Boggan’s Oasis, Shumaker, and Heller Bar.

Peak recreational boating season is between April and August, although river trips are possible throughout the year, depending on river conditions. Because the rivers are primarily free-flowing, water levels and river character changes dramatically with the seasons and local weather. Higher, faster river flows typically occur in the spring and early summer, as warmer temperatures and increased rainfall melt high mountain snows. As the season progresses, the river level gradually drops. By August, river flows are typically very low, with shallower water and more exposed rocks being common. Low water levels usually remain throughout the fall and winter months. Boaters are strongly advised to obtain up-to-date river conditions and weather forecasts when planning their trip. Visitors wishing to avoid crowding should plan their trips to avoid the weekends and holidays whenever possible.

Elevation ranges from 2,500 feet at Minam to 825 feet at the Snake River. Average river gradient is 19 ft. per mile, and numerous rapids are common. Primary rapids are rated Class III, requiring technical maneuvering to navigate. The Narrows Rapid on the Grande Ronde River in Washington is rated Class IV-V depending on conditions, and may require lining or portaging. Scouting of all rapids is strongly advised. Recommended watercraft includes high-quality, multi-chambered inflatable rafts, catarafts, drift boats, and river kayaks. Poorer quality rafts and float tubes may be dangerous and are best left at home. Canoes are not recommended unless specifically designed for whitewater use and operated by boaters with advanced whitewater skills and specialized equipment.

In keeping with the natural character of the river, there are no amenities or improvements in much of the river corridor. Natural hazards exist, including falling trees, rapids, wildlife, inclement weather, and rugged terrain. Search and rescue assistance in the canyons is dangerous, difficult, costly, and time-consuming. All visitors should take every safety precaution and be prepared for the unexpected.

Primitive, undeveloped river camping is available on a “first-come, first-serve” basis. Visitors are required to follow low-impact practices to minimize the traces of their stay and help preserve the natural resources. Mandatory fire pan and portable toilet use, as well as packing out all garbage and treading lightly on vegetation, helps keep the river corridor clean and healthy for future generations. Heavily impacted areas can often lead to further regulation, and may need to be temporarily closed until they can recover.

Vehicle shuttle routes often include rough roads, and may require good map reading skills to follow. Unpaved roads may not be passable to all types of vehicles. Gasoline, food, and other services are not available in rural areas. Cell phones may not operate properly in the remote, rugged terrain of the river corridor. Drivers should be well prepared, and inquire locally for current road conditions and travel times.

In 1987, federal and state agencies started a River Program to assist with the management of the river corridor. River Program employees (“River Rangers”) make periodic float trips throughout the year to fulfill administrative functions, perform various work projects, monitor river conditions, and provide information and assistance to visitors. Look for them during your visit; they will be glad to answer your questions and provide you with detailed river information. Please take time to read the bulletin boards provided at the primary river access points. These boards are posted with important information, seasonal restrictions, and special notices to help you enjoy your visit.

For more information, call the River Station at Minam at 541-437-5580, or learn more on the internet at: www.rivers.gov

